

Informal learning processes of migrants in the civil society: a transnational perspective

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Abstract

The aim of the article is to examine the informal learning processes of migrants particularly in relation to their social engagements in associations, informal groups and transnational networks in the Estonia-Finland space. The theoretical framework relates to socio-cultural, situated learning tradition as well as transnational migration studies. In educational research, transnational perspectives are still relatively new and little explored. The research data (98 interviews) were analysed following theory-guided content analysis. Diverse learning trajectories in relation to the informants' associational engagement were identified. Engagement in various social groups in transnational environments had widened the informants' perspectives and understanding, enabling them to explore differences in societal conceptions and practices. Some of the informants had been acting as transnational brokers, conveying conceptions and practices between communities across national borders. There is a need to examine migrants' learning trajectories in relation to their social engagements not only in the country of settlement but also in transnational spaces.

Keywords: migrants; informal learning; civil society; transnational space; learning trajectories

Introduction

This article examines the informal learning processes of migrants in relation to their activities in non-governmental organisations, informal groups and in border-crossing social networks particularly in the Estonia-Finland space. The informal learning processes and learning environments of the informants are analysed from the perspectives of socio-cultural learning theories, specifically the situated learning approach (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), and social practice theory (Holland & Lave, 2009). *Informal learning* refers here to unorganised, everyday learning processes taking place in different social environments throughout people's lives (also Hager & Halliday, 2009). The key idea of situated learning studies for the purposes of this article

is how people experience on-going learning processes involving identity construction through engaging in various social groups during their life-course.

Transnational migration studies have explored how transnational spaces connecting both migrants and non-migrants are emerging and how cross-border flows of people, ideas, money and goods are transforming communities in at least two nation-states (e.g. Faist, 2000; Levitt, 2001; Portes, 1997; Vertovec, 2009). In this article, *transnational* refers to the social ties and activities of non-state actors as well as to the experiences, perspectives and identifications of individuals crossing national borders. *Transnational spaces* are defined here as socially constructed spaces, which transcend national borders and connect people residing or having resided in at least two or more different societies (cf. Alenius, 2015).

Combining theoretical perspectives from situated learning research, social practice theory and transnational studies makes it possible to explore the complex processes of social learning taking place between migrants and non-migrants in transnational environments. The research questions of the study are: 1) How do migrants engage in voluntary activities in the Estonia-Finland space? And 2) What kinds of learning processes and trajectories do migrants experience in relation to their associative activities and their social engagements in transnational spaces? The findings presented in the article are related to my recent doctoral dissertation on informal learning of migrants and emerging learning spaces in transnational settings (Alenius, 2015).

Only a few studies have been presented examining migrants' learning experiences and emerging educational and learning spaces from transnational perspectives (Cuban, 2014; Guo, 2013; Monkman, 1999; Waters & Brooks, 2012). Moreover, there has been little research applying situated learning theory to scrutinize cross-border learning processes between migrants and non-migrants (Shan & Guo, 2013; Williams, 2006; Williams & Baláz, 2008). Yet recent publications in RELA (Evans, 2014; Kurantowicz, Olesen & Wildemeersch 2014; Morrice, 2014) have drawn attention to the need to explore socio-cultural learning processes and environments in relation to increasing international migration.

Concerning the Estonia-Finland transnational space, the geographical and linguistic proximity of the two countries has facilitated people's cross-border mobility and diverse transnational practices. The macro level political developments related to the collapse of the Soviet regime in the early 1990s and the re-independence of Estonia (annexed by the Soviet Union from 1944 until 1991) as well as the EU membership of Finland since 1995 and Estonia since 2004 have caused an increase of migration flows in this space. The majority of migrants have been moving from Estonia to Finland although there have also been entrepreneurs, students, labour migrants and family members of these groups moving in the opposite direction. In Finland, there have been both temporary migrants from Estonia, including blue-collar posted workers and transmigrants, as well as more permanent immigrants, namely people of Ingrian Finnish origin, students, labour migrants, as well as those moving for family reasons (Jakobson, Järvinen-Alenius, Pitkänen, Ruutsoo, Keski-Hirvelä, Kalev, 2012). In the present decade Finns permanently or temporarily resident in Estonia amount to some 10,000 (Jakobson & Kalev, 2013). Among foreign residents in Finland, Estonians form the largest group: around 48,000 people in 2014, 0.9 % of the total population (Finnish Immigration Service, 2015). Estimates of transmigrating Estonians in the Estonia-Finland space have varied from 20,000 to 70,000 in recent years (Alenius, 2015).

Estonian society has undergone a rapid transformation in the space of a few decades from being a strictly monitored communist system to a neoliberal, free-market economy (Jakobson & Kalev, 2013). Finland could be characterised as a Nordic welfare

society, although there have been debates on how since the 1990s the welfare system has been eroding in Finland. While Finland is still economically more prosperous, for example in terms of average earnings, Estonia's economy has also been growing fast in recent years. Estonia has served as a kind of labour reservoir for Finnish companies, which have been profiting from obtaining less expensive labour force from the neighbouring country (Alenius, 2015). This has been supported by the Finnish legislative decisions in the 2000s' favouring mobility through firms rather than mobility of individual labour migrants (Kyntäjä, 2008).

Socio-cultural, situated learning perspective

The framework of situated learning introduces a social, informal perspective into learning: learning does not occur only in formal educational contexts but particularly in people's everyday lives through participation in various social communities, acquiring new skills and ideas, and constructing identities through such participation. Furthermore, the situated learning perspective challenges the traditional understanding of learning as an individual act of knowledge acquisition and transmission, and, instead, promotes the view of exploring learning as a collective phenomenon, exemplified through shared participation in the social practices (Fuller 2007; Hughes, Jewson & Unwin, 2007).

Lave and Wenger (1991) describe learning as situated activity through the concept of *legitimate peripheral participation*. With this concept they refer to the processes by which individuals participate in different social groups, enhance their knowledge and skills by engaging in shared activities and gradually move toward full participation in these groups. The model of Lave and Wenger (1991), focusing on learning the existing know-how through the journey to becoming a full master of practice, has been criticised for failing to explain how new knowledge can be produced within the communities (Edwards, 2005; Jewson, 2007). Moreover, novices may also bring new knowledge and support the learning of both their peers and experts (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2003).

Individuals belong to different kinds of social groups and communities throughout their lives. Some of these groups can be described as *communities of practice* (hereafter CoP), which Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 98) first defined as 'a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice'. According to Wenger (1998), the three main dimensions of CoP are 1) mutual engagement 2) a joint enterprise and 3) a shared repertoire. The description of CoPs by Lave and Wenger (1991) can be interpreted as referring either broadly to all social environments in which people participate throughout their lives or, more narrowly, to relatively small groups united by common practice and goals (Fuller, 2007). Criticism has been voiced that the meaning of community remains obscure in both Lave's and Wenger's (1991) and also in Wenger's (1998) work. They do not position themselves unequivocally in relation to different definitions of community within sociological tradition although they seem to draw on the idea of symbolically constructed, imagined entities (Jewson, 2007).

The significance of power relations and internal struggles within CoPs for social learning processes have not been sufficiently addressed by situated learning theory and its applications (Contu & Willmott, 2003; Jewson, 2007). In addition, the ways in which CoPs are related to wider historical developments as well as to political and socio-cultural structures are not clearly explained. *Social practice theory* developed by Holland and Lave (2009) focuses on the differences and conflicts among participants of

local practices as well as the impact of macro level developments and wider, historical struggles shaping local communities. The individuals engaging in local practice are historically related and partially divided through power relations and unequal access to material and symbolic resources. Socio-historically developed divisions based, for example, on ethnicity, nationality, racialization and gender, are manifested and negotiated in local arenas—these divisions shape learning opportunities of the individuals (Holland & Lave, 2009; Lave, 1996). Furthermore, Shan and Guo (2013), applying the socio-cultural learning perspectives, have drawn attention to how migrants' learning processes often involve institutionalized processes of othering.

Wenger (1998) examines how individuals may create connections across social groups through brokering and boundary encounters. People throughout their lives participate in the activities of various social groups and communities. Through such multi-membership, they can adopt and share new skills and ideas. *Boundary encounters* are usually events that provide connections between communities, including one-on-one conversations and meetings of delegations. *Brokering* refers to liaisons created by individuals between different communities (Wenger, 1998). It requires translation, coordination and alignment between different perspectives (Wenger, 1998; Williams, 2006). In this research, these concepts are applied to examine cross-border exchanges of beliefs and practices. Previously, Williams and Baláz (2008) examined how particularly famous scientists and politicians acted as knowledge brokers in transnational, professional arenas.

In relation to individuals' engagement within and between CoPs, Wenger (1998) differentiates five types of *trajectories*. *Peripheral trajectories* provide limited access to a community, *inbound trajectories* refers to newcomers with the prospect of becoming full participants, *insider trajectories* relates to full members who continue developing their practice, *boundary trajectories* refers to brokers linking CoPs and crossing boundaries, and *outbound trajectories* lead out of the community. The interaction of multiple trajectories contributes to individuals' on-going identity construction throughout their lives.

In addition to engagement in the activities of the CoPs, Wenger (1998) also explores another mode of belonging. The concept of *imagination* refers to 'a process of expanding oneself by transcending our time and space and creating new images of the world and ourselves' (Wenger, 1998, p. 176). Through imagination, people can locate their engagements and CoPs within broader structures and systems. Imagination can assist in creating communities in which people sharing the same characteristics or experiences feel a sense of unity even if they do not develop shared activities.

Transnational spaces, associative engagement and the informal learning of migrants

Nowadays migrants often engage in transnational activities. The rapid development of information and communication technologies has facilitated the maintenance of frequent contacts between migrants and their relatives, colleagues, and community members residing in the country of origin or in other countries. The decreased costs of transportation have also facilitated cross-border visits by migrants to their former home countries. (Vertovec, 2009) Different forms of migrants' transnational practices have been identified and investigated, such as transnational care, transfers of money and items (*financial and material remittances*), political cross-border cooperation between migrants and associations in their countries of origin, formation of professional networks and exchanges of professional information.

Since the 1990s the ‘transnational turn’ in migration research has introduced a new perspective to analyse migrants’ cross-border activities. Transnational studies question previous ideas on the nation-state as a container of social, political and economic processes and also traditional migration research focusing particularly on the integration of migrants into the ‘receiving’ countries (Faist, 2004). Research on migrants’ transnational practices has highlighted the ways in which people’s lives and their communities have been transformed through intensive transnational contacts and collaboration (Levitt, 2001). Research on *social and political remittances* (for example, Jiménez, 2009; Levitt, 2001) has examined from the perspective of socio-cultural transmission how migrants convey beliefs, practices and mindsets particularly from the countries of settlement to the countries of emigration, and how such ‘transfers’ may affect both individuals and their communities. Research has been done on how migrants engage in transnational social fields, spaces or circuits embedded in at least two societies across national borders (for example, Faist, 2000; Levitt, 2001; Portes, 1997; Vertovec, 2009). These socially constructed, transnational spaces connect migrants and non-migrants particularly between the country of immigration and migrants’ country of origin.

The term *migrant transnationalism* has referred to cross-border practices and institutions connecting migrants and non-migrants living in different nation-states (Vertovec, 2009). Migrant transnationalism has been examined ‘from above’ (macro-structural processes and actors) and ‘from below’ (individuals’ cross-border practices), and also taking into account the meso level: transnational networks, communities and organisations (Guarnizo & Smith, 1998; Portes, 1997). Although this term has been widely used in migration research, it could be interpreted as referring to a particular ideology, i.e. *transnationalism*, although it mainly concerns migrants’ transnational practices and the formation of transnational spaces. Therefore, *transnationality* could be a more appropriate concept to describe the border-crossing activities of individuals, groups and organisations in all spheres of life. (Faist, Fauser, & Reisenauer, 2013).

The critics of transnational studies have underlined that transnational communities as such are not a new phenomenon although the term is a neologism (Kivisto, 2001). In addition, it has been pointed out that not all migrants are transnationally active and the intensity of their cross-border activities may vary throughout the life course. In fact, transnational migration studies may exaggerate the extent of the phenomenon by focusing on migrants with active transnational contacts (Guarnizo, Portes & Haller, 2003, p. 1213). Furthermore, transnational research often focuses on migrants’ ties to their countries of origin, highlight the bipolarity of such spaces and disregard migrants’ other border-crossing ties (Qureshi, Varghese, Osella & Rajan, 2012).

In educational research, transnational perspectives have been applied rather rarely (Guo 2013; Waters & Brooks, 2012), and the focus has mainly been on examining the learning of migrants and migrants’ integration paths from the perspective of ‘receiving’ societies. Yet a few studies have been accomplished exploring migrants’ learning processes and informal learning environments in transnational settings. Ligus (2011) noted how migration influenced both those who migrated and those who stayed behind. For the migrants, migration posed challenges and offered opportunities for border-crossings in emerging learning spaces. In the study of Ligus (Ibid.), the migrants described their lives as balancing between two parallel worlds. Kurantowicz et al. (2014) likewise discussed how cultural learning processes related to increasing international migration flows concerned both immigrants and host country citizens. They pointed out that only few studies had contemplated migration as a process of education and learning.

Morrice (2014) highlighted how migration involved movement across space: the learning trajectories of migrants related both to the social spaces in which they had engaged in the countries of emigration and to the social spaces in the countries of destination. Furthermore, the transformative situations migrants faced in their everyday lives created a need for reflection and on-going identity construction. Evans (2014) explored how a migrant navigated between two cultural and linguistic spaces (Turkish-German). Gender, ethnic and political meanings have shaped migrants' learning trajectories and agency in overlapping spaces. Concerning Mexican migrants in the USA, Monkman (1999) showed how the social, gendered network dynamics and cross-border orientation of migrants affected their informal learning experiences.

Voluntary associations have been portrayed as arenas supporting migrants' enculturation into the host society. Community and voluntary work may enable newcomers to learn the local practices and foster social and cultural capital needed in job acquisition. (Bay, Finseraas & Hagelund, 2010; Webb, 2015). In addition to ethnic, religious and multi-cultural associations, immigrants have also participated in mainstream voluntary organisations along with the citizens of the host society. Some associations of migrants focus on transnational politics and charity activities targeted at their country of origin (Pyykkönen & Martikainen, 2013; Vertovec, 2009).

Data and methods

The data were gathered in an international research project entitled Transnationalisation, Migration and Transformation: Multi-Level Analysis of Migrant Transnationalism (Trans-Net), conducted in 2008-2011¹. The research project examined the transnational practices of migrants in four bi-national spaces (Estonia-Finland, India-UK, Morocco-France and Turkey-Germany) and how these practices were connected to wider, macro-level transformation processes (Pitkänen, İçduygu & Sert, 2012).

The data set of the study includes 78 semi-structured and 20 life-course interviews conducted in Finland. For the interviews, the Finnish research team interviewed people who had migrated to Finland from Estonia either after re-independence (1991) or when under Soviet domination (1944-1991), and also Estonian nationals transmigrating between these countries. A few informants had migrated first to another foreign country, and then to Finland. The respondents included long-term and temporary migrants, labour migrants, entrepreneurs, people migrating due to family reasons, foreign degree students, as well as so-called 'returnees', i.e. Ingrian Finns². At the time of the interviews, the respondents were aged between 19 and 64 years. They had been either living in Finland or transmigrating between the two countries (due to work, studies, business or family reasons) for diverse periods, ranging from one year to more than 20 years. The native languages of the respondents were Estonian, Russian and Finnish. The respondents were relatively highly educated; 31 out of 80 respondents had already obtained university degrees in Estonia/Soviet Union, and nine informants had earned higher education qualifications in the host country. The rest of the informants had completed either primary or upper secondary school education, or had obtained a vocational qualification either in Finland or in Estonia, before or after its regained independence. The informants were mostly selected through snowball sampling and with the assistance of migrant associations and educational institutions. Some contacts were gathered by following the media. In the interview extracts, all the names of the informants are fictional and details that could reveal the identity of the interviewees have been removed.

The interview data were analysed qualitatively, following theory-guided content analysis (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009). The aim was not to test particular theoretical models but rather to enhance the analysis with the assistance of theoretical concepts and perspectives. The first phase of analysis included familiarisation with the data: preliminary readings and identifying significant themes arising from the data. The preliminary organisation and analysis of the data followed the model of data-based analysis (cf. Krippendorff, 2013, text-driven content analyses): the data was organised into main thematic categories and sub-categories in relation to the research questions. The second phase of analysis involved re-examination of theoretical perspectives and choosing the concepts, which assisted in conceptualising the phenomena theoretically. The final stage of analysis involved comparing and assessing the results in relation to the entire data set, the theoretical perspectives applied, and also exploring the meaning of the results with respect to earlier theorisation. The situated learning approach provided a perspective from which to observe how learning took place in people's everyday lives through engaging in different kinds of social groups and communities, and through such participation obtaining new ideas and practices as well as constructing their identities. In my dissertation research, I examined migrants' learning processes not only in associations but also in work communities, families and in other informal groups and border-crossing networks. Transnational migration studies and related concepts enhanced my understanding of how migrants' social engagements and related learning experiences were not necessarily limited to one single society.

Learning trajectories of the migrants in voluntary organisations

The results showed how non-governmental organisations (NGOs), informal civic groups and transnational networks provided informal, social learning environments for many informants. Participation in various associations provided opportunities for the informants to learn the local ways of civic engagement, to explore their historical and socio-cultural heritage, and foster their agency in transnational domains. Several informants had participated in the activities of associations, such as sports clubs, religious organisations, trade unions and ethnic associations in the host country (Finland). Some had engaged in cross-border cooperation between Estonian and Finnish associations, and also a few in international, non-governmental activities. In Finland many associations in which the informants engaged had as their members a majority of the host country citizens. Participation in the shared activities of these groups enabled respondents to observe and reflect on the Finnish ways of conduct, and also compare these with their previous experiences in various social groups and communities in their country of origin. Participation in organisational life fostered the agency of the informants both in the new societal setting and also in transnational arenas. For example, an informant, here called Reet, had improved her self-confidence, professional skills and enlarged social capital by taking part in the activities of Finnish associations as well as in international ecumenical activities.

What do you think this associational engagement has given you?

First of all, assurance that although I'm an immigrant, I have a voice, and they listen to me, and [heed] my professional skills, and I have something to give /.../ it has taught me a lot about the world of associations both here and abroad that I see why associations are useful. In Finland, one couldn't tackle many issues without strong, old associations /.../ and in my own work, I have to be a strong superior and this associative sector has given

this strong competence /../ it also provides networks. All these are networks, and day by day, these become wider. (Reet, age group 30-39 years)

Participation in ethnic associations was considered meaningful for maintaining one's native language and being able to share experiences with others having similar roots. An interesting feature of the clubs for Estonians in Finland was that there were also native Finns taking part in the activities, namely Finns interested in Estonian culture. Consequently such clubs let both native Finns and Estonian speakers get acquainted with another linguistic group and different cultural practices, and provided local, border-crossing learning environments connecting both migrants and non-migrants.

There were a few informants with high levels of associational engagement by establishing new associations themselves, and participating in these as full members, continuously developing the practices within the organisations, exemplifying *insider trajectories* (Wenger, 1998) in such communities. For example, an informant here called Airi, who had worked as a shop assistant, had set up a local association for Estonians to widen her own social contacts as well as to foster her children's fluency in their native language. The members of this association, mostly Estonian-speaking mothers and children, formed an *ethnic community of practice* (cf. Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) which enabled them to foster their ethnic identities and engage in shared activities, such as informal meetings, play acting, and arranging festivities. Airi had also been one of the founding members of a multicultural organisation, which was open to all immigrants. The aim of this organisation was to provide a platform for meeting others with migrant backgrounds, and to promote the empowerment of its members. The shared activities and discussions provided opportunities for *brokering* (Wenger, 1998) across linguistic, ethnic and national demarcations.

Social practice theory has drawn attention to socio-historically developed divisions and frictions that are manifested and negotiated in local communities (Holland & Lave, 2009). The account by the informant Annikki reveals the latent ethnic tensions embedded in the activities of an Ingrian Finnish association. Annikki had grown up in a multilingual environment in which Estonian, Russian and Ingrian Finnish were spoken. Her attempt to engage with the activities of an Ingrian-Finnish association in Finland failed because she felt she did not share the same language, cultural habits, or life experiences as the other members of this club. Therefore, her learning trajectory can be characterized as an *outbound trajectory* (Wenger, 1998) leading out of the community due to failing to associate her interpretation of Ingrian Finnish identity and tradition with the shared practices of this group. One can also reflect to what extent power relations restricted her opportunities to fully engage in the shared activities of this group.

I joined an association for Ingrian Finns but then I realised that I'm so far apart from that association because I was brought up in Estonia and there [in the association for Ingrian Finns] the younger ones didn't speak Finnish at all. The wives and husbands of the offspring of Ingrian Finns spoke Finnish and even they spoke it so badly, and some of the elderly people spoke it and some didn't, and the others, I didn't understand them, and also the manners were rather Russian, and then I decided not to go there. It was not the Ingrian [Finnish], which my mother spoke to me. (Annikki, age group 50-59 years)

Only a few informants had actively engaged in religious or political organisations. The informants often underlined how religious activities were forbidden or strictly monitored in Estonia during the Soviet occupation. Therefore, religion as such, and religious associations had been remote for many interviewees. Although some had

joined religious organisations or taken part in religious ceremonies in Finland, their participation in such practices was often rather sporadic. Concerning local political associations, the informants with higher education who had actively participated in these in the new host country described how they lacked opportunities to engage fully in joint activities and that they were not treated as full members of these associations. They described how political associations had disregarded their professional knowledge and had highlighted their migrant background in the campaigns. Therefore the informants' engagement with political associations can be described as following a *peripheral trajectory* (Wenger, 1998) providing only a limited access to the practices of these groups. The position of politically active informants could be described as disempowering peripherality (Lave & Wenger, 1991), which diminished their opportunities for full engagement within these groups.

Transnational brokering through cross-border voluntary activities

A few informants took part in professional and political associations in Estonia. Regarding professional organisations, membership was useful for enlarging the professional networks of the informants, and also facilitating cross-border exchange of ideas particularly on business and scientific affairs. With respect to the political realm, membership had more a symbolic function. For example, an Estonian-speaking informant, Kert, explained how she had actively been engaged in civil defence organisations and patriotic students' associations while she was studying in Estonia, but she had maintained her membership due to a desire to maintain her national affiliation. Participation in these associations allowed her to cherish and promote nationalist ideas and foster her sense of being Estonian.

A few informants reported on present or past cross-border cooperation between Estonian and Finnish associations in the cultural, social and health sectors. The informants underlined the importance of these activities for their workplaces, and also for providing the first direct contacts with the Finns and the Finnish language, which later also facilitated their immigration to Finland. For example, an Estonian doctor explained how, thanks to non-governmental, cross-border cooperation with the Finns in the late 1980s and early 1990s, she was able to improve her language proficiency and obtain new, professional knowledge through the material cross-border transfers. Transnational cooperation provided opportunities for *boundary encounters* (Wenger, 1998), such as meetings of delegations, between migrants and non-migrants, which enabled cross-border flows of material, people and ideas to take place particularly after the regaining of Estonian –independence in 1991, also resembling the notion of *transnational social space* (Faist, 2000) characterised by such flows.

One of the informants, Silvi, had been a particularly active *transnational broker* (cf. Wenger, 1998) between Estonian and Finnish organisations and local communities. During the Soviet era in Estonia, the authorities had strictly curtailed the activities of organisations. Silvi explained how she had re-established voluntary activities and community development programmes in her former home village in Estonia with the assistance of Finnish associations, educational institutions, entrepreneurs and municipal authorities. Silvi had also cooperated with ethnic and religious minority groups in Estonia, and discussed the need for the reinterpretation of national history, mutual understanding and democratic ideas. Through such transnational cooperation one can identify the *flows of social and political remittances* (for example, Levitt, 2001;

Jiménez, 2009), i.e. social and political beliefs and practices being conveyed particularly from Finland to Estonia but also in the other direction.

Some respondents had taken part in transnational cooperation that was not limited to the Estonia-Finland space but also extended to other countries. These transnational communities and networks united Estonians living in different countries. For example, an informant here called Jaanis had engaged in cross-border cooperation with other Estonian migrant associations and groups located in different countries. Such transnational collaboration enabled the participants to share ideas about their activities and, more generally, about the integration policies of the host countries. Another informant, Kaarina, had taken part in the activities of an Internet community of handicraft enthusiasts. This community consisted mostly of Estonian-speaking women living in different countries. It enabled them to communicate in Estonian with other members sharing the same passion and also to socialize with others of the same national origin. The activities were not limited to net communication but also included charity projects in Estonia. This mostly *virtual community of practice* exemplifies different features of CoPs as described by Wenger (1998). *Mutual engagement* was related to their shared on-line activities and also jointly organised charity projects. Their *shared repertoire* included shared ways of displaying their products, shared concepts and projects, such as ‘Nominations for the Mother/Father of the Year’ in which they crocheted bed covers in the colors of the Estonian flag, and gave these to the nominees. *Joint enterprise* covered, for example, their net discussions and negotiations on forthcoming activities and targets. Through shared activities these participants could also foster their gender and national identities.

A couple of informants with higher education had engaged in cross-border activities aiming to influence political beliefs and decision-making through their professional activities. For example, they had written newspaper articles, updated blogs on societal issues, and lectured on political themes. The purpose of these activities had been to introduce new political perspectives, ideas, concepts and successful civic innovations mainly from the country of settlement to the country of origin. These endeavours can therefore be explained through the concept of *political remittances*, i.e., conveying political conceptions and practices from the country of immigration back to the country of emigration (also Jiménez, 2009). Such agency can also be described as an example of *transnational brokering* (cf. Wenger, 1998) in the civic realm: introducing beliefs and practices from one community to another across national borders. Concerning the media, these activities were, in fact, targeted at a wider audience, not only at one specific community of practice.

Migrants’ informal learning processes in a cross-border context

Non-governmental associations and informal civic groups had provided informal learning arenas for several respondents. Through their active engagement in these groups they had been able to learn the local ways of civic engagement, understand their own heritage, and foster their agency both in the new host society and in transnational arenas. In associations various cultural conceptions and traditions were negotiated and contested, and the informants had also been opposing and criticising prevailing practices. Therefore, as noted by several researchers (for example, Contu & Willmott, 2003; Holland & Lave, 2009), conflicts, disagreements and struggles are an integral part of the on-going development of social groups sharing practices. Cross-border co-operation between Finnish and Estonian associations had provided opportunities for

transnational brokering: sharing conceptions and practices regarding civic activities between different communities, across national borders. In addition, brokering also took place at local level: through multi-membership of different associations the informants had been able to convey ideas from one association to another. These *brokers* had facilitated the exchange of conceptions and practices across linguistic and cultural borders, and had followed *boundary trajectories* (Wenger, 1998).

In addition to engagement in associations, ties to host country citizens and to friends and relatives living in other countries provided opportunities for the respondents to share and adopt new conceptions and practices. Through these various cross-border contacts, contemporary societal issues related to Finland and Estonia was discussed and ideas questioned. This informal communication, often occurring in pairs (one-to-one) and sometimes in small groups, enabled informants to share ideas with others. Communication between friends was mostly limited to one-to-one conversations representing one form of *boundary encounters* (Wenger, 1998) between individuals belonging to different communities of practice; such encounters offer opportunities to exchange and adopt new practices and ideas. According to Wenger (1998), the advantage of such one-to-one contacts is that participants can be candid about their own communities and practices, although individuals cannot fully convey all aspects of their own practice without the presence of others and everyday activities.

Historical, socio-cultural and political struggles shape local practices and also the individuals participating in these (Holland & Lave, 2009). In this study, the informants compared Estonian, Russian and Finnish behaviour and values in light of their experiences in local communities. Differences in people's conduct were often associated with the historical development of Finland, Estonia and the former Soviet Union. The effects of the Soviet system and the rapid social change in Estonia after 1991 on people's ways of thinking and acting were discernible. In general, Finnish society was regarded as more mature and developed than Estonian society. It was moreover perceived that the institutional and historical developments in these societies had affected people's values and practices. Several informants underlined how Finns in general diligently followed the rules and laws, while in Estonia people considered whether the rule in itself was useful or whether one would be caught for breaking the law. Dishonesty and fraudulence were linked to the Soviet influences in Estonian society.

The informants reflected how experiences of living in two (or more) different societies and engaging in various social communities within these had been an enriching learning experience. Multi-membership of various groups had provided opportunities to observe and compare differences in behaviours and beliefs at both local and national levels. Yet the informants also highlighted that adjusting to 'living many lives simultaneously' in two societies required individuals to engage in self-reflection and carry out identity work. One needed to explore one's own roots and frame of reference, and to challenge previous assumptions. In order to integrate into the new environment, people had to make some adjustments to their conduct and perspectives. Yet adjusting one's behaviour according to the setting was a constant challenge.

In addition to voluntary organisations, work communities and families had also been significant learning environments for many respondents. At workplaces the informants had discussed and debated various social issues with their colleagues. Participation in a Finnish work community was considered important for fostering one's feeling of belonging to a Finnish community, and more broadly, to Finnish society as a full, respected member although a few informants reported having experienced discrimination at their workplaces because of their gender and/or ethnicity. Everyday

interaction within families involved on-going socio-cultural learning that had also affected the informants' ways of identification. Those informants in particular who were married to native Estonians had maintained a firm national, Estonian identity. Informants living with native Finns, connected their gradually transformed transnational identity with adopting and combining Finnish, Estonian or Russian beliefs, practices and mindsets in their everyday lives. Therefore informants' accounts of their identity development revealed how the processes of transnational, social learning were taking place in bi-national families. Transnational identity was moreover connected to the changing linguistic behaviours, such as speaking Estonian with a Finnish accent.

The on-going construction of identity through participating in the shared practices of social communities is an integral aspect of situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Identity development was also an essential part of the informants' informal learning processes in transnational social environments. Participation in different social groups and communities, such as families, work communities and associations, involved on-going identity reflection and construction. The majority of the respondents had maintained a strong, national identity. Many long-term residents in Finland as well as those who had bonding ties with Finns, particularly through marriage, manifested *transnational identity*, feeling Finnish-Estonian, Finnish-Russian or in-between these. Some informants had adopted *multicultural identities* as well as *regional, global and glocal identities* (see also Pries, 2013). In addition, there were a few reporting *ambiguous identity*, i.e. who were unable to explain their ethno-national identity and felt alienated from both societies. These informants belong to ethnic minorities in both societies and had experienced discrimination both in their local communities and in public spaces, which increased their sense of exclusion in different arenas. The informants' trajectories of identity construction were shaped by trans-local, historical forces, struggles and debates (also Holland & Lave, 2009) and by their experiences of participating in various social groups and the ways others perceived them in local communities. Particularly the language of communication and the ways of speaking were used to categorize people as insiders or outsiders of social communities.

Discussion

This study focused on exploring the experiences of migrants as non-traditional learners in the Estonia-Finland space. Compared to other migrant groups in Finland, Estonians in particular enjoy a privileged position. In relation to the attitudes of native Finns towards different immigrant communities, Estonians are favourably perceived by the majority of local citizens (Jaakkola, 2009). Therefore, this may also be reflected in the informants' interview accounts: there are not many reports of discrimination or experiences of exclusion. The fact that many informants were fluent in Finnish may also have facilitated their integration into the local communities. Consequently, one could examine and compare the informal learning experiences of different migrant groups both in this space but also in different transnational spaces. Such comparisons could reveal the different ways in which power relations and discrimination may affect the transnational learning opportunities of migrants in various settings. In addition, focusing exclusively on one community of practice might yield a more nuanced analysis of the social relations and interactions in the community.

For adult educators, it is useful to understand the life-worlds of migrants as non-traditional learners, their learning trajectories and the meaning of transnational ties in their everyday lives. Monkman (1999) has underlined that understanding the

transnational life-styles of migrants could support educational planning and practice to better satisfy the needs of learners with migrant backgrounds. Education professionals could reflect on how migrants' learning paths have been shaped by the various communities in which they have engaged and by their experiences of living in at least two different societal settings. Moreover they could draw on and utilise migrants' prior knowledge obtained in formal, non-formal and informal educational settings as well as their abilities to compare different societal and cultural environments.

Although migrant's integration paths have often been examined from the perspective of the receiving society, transnational migration studies (e.g. Faist, 2004; Portes, 2003; Vertovec, 2009) have argued that migrants can maintain emotional bonds to more than one society. The findings of this study also highlight the ways in which migrants construct identities through their multi-membership of various communities in transnational spaces. Yet sustained ties and attachment to the country of origin do not necessarily prevent individuals from integrating to the new host society. Migrants' integration into the country of immigration and enduring transnational linkages should not be seen as mutually exclusive nor binary opposites (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004).

Instead of applying intercultural learning perspectives, this study has combined ideas from the situated learning framework and from transnational migration studies. With this approach, I have endeavoured to provide a new way to explore cross-border learning encounters. When exploring multicultural environments, it is often difficult to avoid essentialist understanding of cultures, i.e. representing these as separate, static units determining human action, and portraying individuals as representatives of 'their cultures' (Dervin & Keihäs, 2013). The theoretical perspectives adopted in this study emphasise the need to understand the ways in which multi-membership and engagement in various social groups shape individuals' learning paths and on-going identity construction. For migrants, informal learning is simultaneously situated in diverse local learning communities but also shaped by the macro-level development of the societies in which they have lived and in which their lives are embedded.

Notes

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² The Ingrian Finns include Finnish, Estonian, and Russian speakers who have Finnish/Ingrian Finnish speaking ancestors. The immigration of Ingrian Finns to Finland was supported by the Finnish government in the 1990s and 2000s.

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